

Liberation Theology and Black Consciousness in the Struggle against Apartheid in South Africa

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Black Consciousness serves as the loose term for the social, political and religious ideology that sparked and guided the anti-Apartheid movements in South Africa. Diverse as the groups that preached it, Black Consciousness drew from a variety of influences in its efforts both to motivate black South Africans and to challenge and reproach whites. One particular influence, that of Liberation Theology from Latin America, lent itself to a range of interpretations, including those of Steve Biko, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Kairos Theologians. While all had religious roots, their roles in the anti-Apartheid movements were very different. It speaks to the appeal of Liberation theology that it was used as justification for such a wide range of actions and ideologies.

Liberation Theology

Liberation Theology developed in Latin America as an appeal by village priests to the church hierarchy to untangle itself from the oppressive machinations of the state. Traditionally, the state in Latin America had used the church as a mechanism for social and political control. Priests preached an otherworldly gospel, encouraging peasants to accept their lot in life and to quietly serve the interests of their overlords. In the 1950s, populist movements began emerging in select countries. These groups often used religious language to justify their calls for land reform and social justice. This ideology was gradually accepted by lower-level priests and formalized into the religious doctrine now known as Liberation theology.

The Christian Institute, a multiracial and interdenominational organization, first introduced liberation theology into South Africa. In addition to seeking simply to increase non-violent interracial interaction,

the Institute made another major reorientation- it began to encourage the resurgence of Black consciousness. Gone now was the old liberal illusion that change could come solely from education and moral appeals directed to the privileged. Rather, Black initiatives would be crucial in pressing for change.¹

Many of the more conservative Dutch Reformed Church leaders rejected this shift in policy. But there still existed a strong push to open up not only the church, but also society as well to blacks. Impetus came from the University Christian Movement, founded in 1967.² More importantly,

these new leaders sought not only to incorporate blacks, but also to develop black interpretations and approaches to religion.

Within 18 months there was a Black majority as its sessions and a caucus had emerged that was interested in radical writings from the US, particularly Black theology as a vehicle for examining the Scriptures and the predicament of the oppressed.³

This caucus on Black theology would play a vital role in the development of black resistance to apartheid.

Black Theology and Black Leadership

Black theology seeks to relate God and Christ once more to the Black man and his daily problems. It wants to describe Christ as a fighting God and not a passive God. . . . Blacks have had enough experience as objects of racism not to want to reverse the tables. . . . In time we shall be able to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible- a more human face.⁴

Black theology emerged as a 'theological articulation of black consciousness in the religious realm'.⁵ Due to this link to the church, an important social institution for older, more conservative blacks, as well as for the poor, black consciousness was able to expand its reach further than it might have had it remained a student movement in the urban areas. For Steve Biko, the influential founder of the South African Student Organization, a staunchly 'non-white' activist group, the appeal to Black and Liberation theology was practical: 'Too many people are involved in religion for the blacks to ignore. Obviously the only path open for us now is to redefine the message in the Bible and to make it relevant to the struggling masses. . . .'⁶ Although Biko had been raised in the church, and in fact learned of Liberation theology through his involvement with the Christian Institute,⁷ his focus quickly became secular. But the influence of Liberation theology, via Black theology remained: '[a]ccording to Biko, the real problem [was] land distribution, economic deprivation, and the disinheritance of the black people. . . .'⁸

On nearly the opposite end of the Black consciousness spectrum was Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Tutu was first exposed to Liberation theology while on staff at the World Council of Churches' Theological Education Fund.⁹ He drew parallels between the situation of blacks in South Africa to the Israelite slaves in the Exodus story as reason for hope. Tutu, like the original

proponents of Liberation theology, believed that God had a preferential option for the oppressed, and that just as He had acted to help the Israelites free themselves, so too would He support the anti-Apartheid movement. However, Tutu rejected the trend in Black theology that argued that blacks were morally superior to whites. Instead, he argued that God would support the blacks because they were oppressed, not because they were better or more deserving than whites. For this reason, he focused on developing multiracial organizations. He believed that blacks and whites could eventually come together as South Africans, just as they did in Europe and America.

The Kairos Document

Tutu was criticized soundly by many leaders for his nonracial, nonviolent approach to the anti-Apartheid struggle, not only by secular leaders such as Biko, but by fellow ministers. One important group was the Kairos Theologians, authors of the *Kairos Document*.

Kairos, the Greek word meaning opportunity or decisive moment, was seen as the perfect term to describe South Africa in 1985. Sophiatown had been destroyed, and the 10-year anniversary of another telling moment in the anti-Apartheid struggle, the Soweto massacre, was just a year away. Moreover, divisions within the DRC had become so severe that it was on the verge of a schism. Despite the desperate desire to keep the church together, the situation for blacks had become absolutely intolerable. Decisive, and if necessary, divisive, action was needed. A growing number of theologians and ministers could no longer agree with Tutu's faith in the goodness of both whites and blacks.

The *Kairos Document* states that it is wrong for churches to preach reconciliation without first securing justice. To their mind, there could be no reconciliation between justice, as represented by the blacks' struggle for freedom, and injustice, represented not only by the Apartheid system, but also those whites who were complacent. In their eyes, however, all whites, even the liberals, fell into this category, because even their anti-Apartheid groups failed to incorporate black opinions, and instead dictated the concerns of blacks to them. Reconciliation only forced blacks to become 'accomplices' in their own oppression.¹⁰—

Rather than preach negotiation and reconciliation, [the *Kairos Document*] advise[d] churches to urge confrontation until the state indicate[d] it [was] willing to undergo fundamental change. Instead of trying to convince those in power to change, the churches should commit themselves to the struggle of the oppressed against unjust structures. —

Although Liberation theology generally eschewed violence, the new calls for action were very much in line with its teachings.

However, these divisions in approaches only strengthened the Black theology and Black Consciousness movements. Each group was able to draw on Liberation theology for influence and guidance, but interpreted it uniquely. This led to a wide range of anti-Apartheid groups, each putting pressure on the government and white society in their own way. While some groups were obviously more successful than others, each played a vital role. No particular group can take full credit for overthrowing the Apartheid regime; it was the diversity of appeals, the sheer range of reactions and movements that finally captured the whites' attention. But without the underlying appeal to Christian teachings of equality, resistance to oppression, and social justice, the anti-Apartheid movement would not have been successful. Secular attacks were simply dismissed as the ravings of communists, but white South Africans were proud and devoted Christians, and the exposure of their hypocrisy, in a multitude of ways, and from a plethora of sources, affected them deeply. Despite the dismissal of Biko's proponents, as well as the Kairos Theologians, whites did play an important role in ending the Apartheid regime.

Conclusion

Originally developed in Latin America, Liberation theology, with its messages of resistance to oppression, social justice, and direct action, was easily adopted by the leaders of the burgeoning anti-Apartheid movements. Even those leaders that were not particularly religious in their ideologies, such as Steve Biko and the SASO, found that using Christian messages of equality and the pursuit of the kingdom of God on earth as justification for their struggle to reform South African society helped them connect with older or more conservative blacks. It also served to expose the hypocrisy of white Christians, who were complacent in the continuation of the Apartheid regime.

But Liberation theology also lent itself to conflict, as some leaders emphasized certain aspects over others. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with his experiences in the multiracial society of England, felt that whites could play an active and vital role in black liberation, and that they would need to be included in the present struggle, in order to avoid reverse discrimination after Apartheid had ended. The Kairos theologians, however, agreed more with Biko, believing that all whites were complacent in the Apartheid regime, and thus blacks could rely only on their own actions. Moreover, while Tutu did call for action, believing that God would preference the poor, he preferred peaceful means of addressing the state. The Kairos theologians insisted that violence could be justified as part of the ongoing struggle.

Instead of weakening the anti-Apartheid movement, the differences in interpretations and subsequent approaches to the anti-Apartheid struggle strengthened its appeal to white society, as well as increased its venues of protest. Ultimately, the combination of the use of Christian language and the wide variety of protest groups helped call attention to the need for whites to reform their society. In this way, liberation theology became just as influential as secular economic and social theory. By drawing on its teachings, black leaders were able to help fight apartheid and begin South Africa on its own path towards redemption.

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[1](#) Hope and Young 78

[2](#) Hope and Young 78-79

[3](#) Hope and Young 78-79

[4](#) Biko, qtd. Hope and Young 80

[5](#) Mofokeng 39

[6](#) Biko qtd. Graybill 84

[7](#) Graybill 87

[8](#) Graybill 84

[9](#) Graybill 107

[10](#) Graybill 115

[11](#) Graybill 115